

MICHIGAN

MSU Faculty Senate chair slams board leader Rema Vassar for chaos, outbursts at meeting

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The chair of Michigan State University's Faculty Senate is criticizing the embattled board of trustees leader Rema Vassar for what he calls "intimidation and bullying" during Friday's raucous board meeting.

MSU trustees gathered Friday in a meeting filled with audience outbursts and calls for order. Students, including some from the Black Students' Alliance, and others voiced their support of Vassar; others called on her to resign.

MSU Faculty Senate Chair Jack Lipton issued a statement Saturday in which he argued that Vassar didn't try to stop the chaos.

"The board meeting yesterday, filled with Chair Vassar supporters, demonstrated Trustee Scott's charges of intimidation and bullying in action," he said. "The chaos brought and disrespect shown by her supporters could have been stopped by a single statement from Chair Vassar, yet she elected to let the mob rule the room."

Vassar defended herself in a statement Sunday night and said the MSU president runs meetings.

"During Friday's meeting, trustees, faculty, administrators and staff agreed we should place our students front and center," she said.

The calls for Vassar to step down began Oct. 22, when Trustee Brianna Scott sent a letter to board members calling for Vassar to step down or for Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to intervene and take the extraordinary measure of removing her.

Scott accused Vassar of bullying trustees and university administrators, and violating codes of conduct.

At the board meeting Friday, Scott spoke about what she said were the racial overtures directed at her after her letter was publicized. Some in the audience heckled or interrupted Scott during her

She had asked those at the meeting to allow her to speak without being interrupted and said, "And if not, then maybe you should leave." An audience member then said, "We think you should leave."

Lipton said during the meeting, some in the audience were "screaming at the top of their lungs, yelling at people, jeering at anyone who said a comment that they didn't like." He said Vassar failed to intervene and "control her supporters and try and keep the room civil."

Thursday, the Faculty Senate voted to join the call for Vassar to step down, saying the school could risk its accreditation over her alleged conduct. But university officials said it was premature to say what the risks to the school's accreditation might be. University officials said the school is scheduled to have its accreditation examined next year, with a comprehensive evaluation visit set for November 2024.

Members of MSU's Black Students' Alliance were among those who came to the board meeting to show support for Vassar. Ty'Rianna Leslie, BSA's president, said that if someone who supports the Black community "is being gunned down by the other people on the board, then of course we're going to support her."

BSA Vice President Jordan Wesson said that the Black community at MSU does not believe Vassar's conduct is bullying.

"It seems that the trustees are scared because she's a strong and smart Black woman, which is usually not typical in a position of power, and so they're trying to make her less of herself," he said.

Wesson said the outbursts during the meeting "showed that the trustees are in disarray" and signified the board not "able to do their job," pointing out others in the audience who had outbursts on topics unrelated to the Vassar issue, including Palestinian students and Nassar survivors of sexual abuse.

Former state Rep. Cynthia Johnson shouted out at the meeting that Vassar is "being publicly lynched," according to a WDIV video. Johnson, who is Black, explained the concept of "political lynching" in an interview with The Detroit News on Sunday.

"It doesn't matter if she's wrong or right, we're going to beat you in front of the whole public, and they're going to believe not you, they're going to believe us, because we are in control," she said, describing the position of those in power.

Johnson said Lipton's conclusion that Vassar was bullying during the meeting is "nonsense." She noted that Vassar is the board's chair, not its parliamentarian.

Vassar said that at the meeting, "what we heard from Nassar survivors, students and alum was pain and disappointment."

"We need to listen," she said. "Silencing and suppression disallow transparency and accountability. Their voices need to be heard, even if Mr. Lipton is uncomfortable."

She added that interim President Teresa Woodruff allowed Lipton to voice his concerns about her conduct during the meeting.

Lipton noted that the Faculty Senate chair is always scheduled to speak at the board meetings as the faculty liaison.

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